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U.S. Moving to Curb Exchange of Science Data

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A technical paper that was published in a scientific journal several years ago explained to the oil industry an improved method for breaking rocks while drilling. According to the Defense Department, the Russians picked up the technology and used it to build weapons that can destroy American tanks.

As a result of this and similar incidents the government cites, the Reagan Administration is stepping up its efforts to clamp down on what it calls the "leakage" of technology to potential enemies.

But many scientists across the country are alarmed at the veiled and not so veiled threats from Washington to limit the free and open exchange of ideas and results that is the bedrock of the scientific enterprise.

"The anxiety that has now been created by the national security authorities produces the almost unavoidable conclusion that the government is pressing for censorship of some kind," said William D. Carey, executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in a telephone interview.

Inhibition Urged

In recent weeks, Frank C. Carlucci, the deputy secretary of defense, published a long letter in the journal Science urging an inhibition on the flow of information, and Adm. Bobby R. Inman, the deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, told a scientific meeting in Washington that scientists may have to submit many papers to the government for pre-publication review to keep matters of national interest from leaking out.

Carlucci declined to be interviewed. But Inman returned a phone call promptly and declared, "This is a problem that's going to get a lot noisier in the months ahead."

"Scientists ought to start thinking about the forum and the vehicles for getting their ideas together on the larger issues of technology transfer that are clearly going to be on the public agenda."

"Far better for the scientists to be in a position to get in there and lobby and give advice rather than just to wait for the government to regulate."

Related to the publishing issue is the current dispute between the State Department and several universities, including Stanford, over government-sought restrictions on what a visiting Soviet scientist may be shown and told.

As a result, many scientists see a concerted campaign on the part of the government to unnecessarily limit their freedom for little reason and with the prospect of little gain. They say American scientists have learned as much as they have lost from international exchanges, and they doubt whether the flow of knowledge can be stopped regardless of what the government does.

Their cries of protest have begun appearing in the scientific journals.

"American scientists legitimately can question whether the government's new approach can achieve its goal without highly counterproductive and deleterious effects on the current structure of our research institutions," Edward Gurbjoy wrote in Physics Today.

Discussions Sought

At the same time, however, efforts are under way at the highest level of the government and the scientific community to begin an exchange that would result in the acceptance by scientists of some restrictions on what may be published.

Frank Press, the president of the National Academy of Sciences, said in an interview recently that the Academy is willing to act as an honest broker in bringing the two sides together.

When Inman of the CIA spoke at the scientific meeting, he listed the following areas as particularly troublesome for the government: computers, electronic equipment and techniques, lasers, crop projections and manufacturing procedures.

While many people were alarmed by the sweep of the government's interest, Press said he thought Inman had spoken "off the top of his head," and added, "He just wants to start the dialogue."

And D. Allan Bromley, a Yale

University physicist who is chairman of the board of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said by telephone:

"Bobby Inman was obviously making an extreme case. He was going to get the attention of everybody, and he sure did. But I don't for a moment believe that he really feels that one should clamp down to the extent that his remarks have been interpreted."

Bromley said he thought some compromise could be worked out by reasonable people on both sides.

"What worries me," he said, "is a kind of knee-jerk reaction on the part of the scientific community that, by God, nobody's going to infringe my publication rights, and the same knee-jerk reaction on the military side that, by God, nobody's going to publish anything that I don't approve of. That kind of thing will lead to major loss both to the military and to the scientific community."

While the Reagan Administration has brought renewed attention to the question, the issue is not new. Two years ago, the Carter Administration prevented Soviet scientists from attending conferences here on lasers and bubble memories for computers.

A year ago, a committee of scholars urged researchers in the field of code-making and breaking to submit their research papers to the National Security Agency for pre-publication review. The suggestion followed a threat by the agency to ask Congress to pass a law prohibiting the publication of such work. The director of the National Security Agency during that dispute and its resolution was Inman, who is now No. 2 at the CIA.

Since the proposal for review was made, two dozen papers in cryptography have been submitted to the Security Agency, and all have promptly been approved for open publication. The system is still

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